

**Generation Status:**

Examining the Reflections of Immigrant Experience in Parenting Practices

Samantha Ma

University of British Columbia

ASIX 300A Hong Kong Diaspora in Canada

Dr. Benjamin Cheung

April 18, 2024

## **Introduction**

This paper explores the changing attitudes of immigrant generations in regard to child rearing and recent changes in parenting styles to show the intersection of acculturation and tradition. Since the 1850s four major waves of Hong Kong immigration have occurred in Canada. (Cheung, 2024) While the earliest wave of immigrants came in pursuit of gold and riches, the second, third, and fourth waves have come seeking social, political, and economic stability, an environment of stability in which children can be raised with a better education, and new families can be started. With these four major waves of immigration occurring across several decades, multiple generations of Hong Kong and Chinese Canadians now cross paths.

In this paper, I will be exploring my parent's experiences as first and second generation immigrant Canadians. Taking into consideration their childhood experiences and family structures, our interview transcript will be used to analyze the effects of immigrant upbringing on parenting styles and subsequently on children's experiences with identity formation and heritage connection. This paper will also explore the traditional expectations and styles of Chinese parenting, the nuanced relationship between immigrant parents and children, and the efforts to maintain cultural connection while becoming generationally distanced from heritage origin.

## **Immigrant Generation Labels**

In the context of immigration, generation labels denote the generational distance from the first member of a family born outside of a nation. According to Statistics Canada (Government of Canada, 2011), The first generation category includes "persons who were born outside Canada", Second generation includes "persons who were born in Canada and had at least one parent born outside Canada", and Third generation includes "persons who were born in Canada

with both parents born in Canada”. The 2011 National Household Survey of Canada revealed that first generation immigrants comprised 22% of the country’s total population and second generation immigrants comprised 17.4% of the total population. For nearly 55% of second generation Canadians, both parents were born outside of Canada. (Statistics Canada, 2011)

Though the term “second generation” extends the concept of first generation, there is a sense of ambiguity in its discordance with the genealogical generation system. While a family consisting of multiple generations immigrating together would all be labeled “first generation” immigrants, parents who immigrate with their older children and later have more children would find their older and younger children categorized in differing immigrant generations. Adding to the confusion and difficulties of navigating heritage based identity, these host nation labels further convolute the issue of feeling a sense of “in-between”, distanced from and by national and cultural identity. (Li & Findlay, 1996)

### **Observing Immigrant Generation Differences**

In the interview, my parents speak about their early childhoods. My mother grew up in Hong Kong and my father, a second generation Canadian, grew up in Edmonton, Alberta with immigrant parents.

**Samantha:** What was your childhood like?

**Mom:** Oh well my childhood is very different from *your* childhood. When I was a kid, my parents worked seven days a week, from morning to late night. So we don’t have much time spent with our parents. We usually just spend time at home...uh because there's an age gap between my brothers, sister and me, I usually just hung out with my friends or talked on the phone with them.

**Dad:** So, my childhood I guess—

**Samantha:** Because your two childhoods are very different.

**Dad:** Both our parents worked in... I guess basic industry jobs, right? Because they are first generation immigrants, So... their English wasn't very good, it's not like they could get an office job or anything, any kind of a high paying job. We lived a very basic kind of uh, we lived a basic kind of childhood... yeah. We didn't go on vacations like we do all the time with you guys. Right?

**Samantha:** *uh huh*

**Dad:** Back then life was harder

Both from low income families, the amount of time my parents were able to spend with their own parents was little. For my mother, this was commonplace in her environment, for my father this proved to be an indicative point of difference and comparison between his family and other Western families.

**Samantha:** Were you close with Grandpa and Grandma?

**Dad:** Was I close with my dad and mum?

**Samantha:** Yeah

**Dad:** Uhhhhh well... kinda, for a Chinese family I don't think we are that different but-

**Samantha:** What do you mean for a Chinese family?

**Dad:** Well, I think Western families have more social events. Like they have game nights or something like that, We didn't really have that growing up.. We didn't play games with our parents.

**Samantha:** I think that that's just in movies

**Dad:** We didn't, we didn't... play board games with our parents, at least I didn't. Uhhh... I didn't, My parents didn't read to us when we were young or anything like that. Right? They... were always busy working. So... with you and Jackie, we spent time reading to you guys playing with you, playing games. Planning a lot of family vacations... but for us, family vacations were far and few between because we didn't have a lot of money when we were growing up.

**Samantha:** So would you say your goals as a parent were different because of how you grew up? Like you wanted to spend more time with us because you didn't spend a lot of time with your parents?

**Dad:** Yeahhh..we wanted you guys to feel loved and to give you good memories of us.

**Mom:** Well, I can only say that times have changed, the society of the past and the society now is different

For my father, providing observed experiences that he rarely got to participate in became crucial elements of his own parenting practices. To minimize the sense of "otherness" he felt as a child

for his children, my father makes every possible effort to supply opportunities for an authentic Canadian experience. Every Thanksgiving has a turkey to carve, each Christmas has had a Christmas tree, tree angel, lights, presents, stockings, gingerbread houses and more. With one native parent and one foreign born parent, I have always been very secure in my Chinese-born Canadian Identity. Contradictory experiences such as being selected for ESL lessons while simultaneously enrolled in the advanced reading club were normal occurrences. Contrasting with that of the experience of my father, though by definition a second generation immigrant, my experience in identity formation was much more straightforward.

### **Generation 2.5**

Granted that the Government of Canada and the majority of studies do not define a difference between those born to one or two foreign-born parents, there is good reason to believe that the presence of a native-born parent does make a difference in respect to socioeconomic outcomes and identities of children. Native born parents are more likely to participate in social networks composed of other native-born individuals. (Karthick Ramakrishnan, 2004)

Children like myself, born to one first generation immigrant parent and one native born parent can be considered to be Generation 2.5. Generation 2.5 compared to 2.0, have access to a parent with a likely higher level of education, English literacy, and similar lived experience, minimizing the social and economic gap. This generation would also have more consistent exposure to multiple ethnic groups, reflecting functional adaptations to a multicultural environment. By developing positive relationships with members of both ethnic groups, Gen 2.5 can develop a sense of self in both cultural systems and navigate a hybridized identity with ease and situational flexibility. (Noels & Clément, 2015)

## **Familial Obligations and Parental Expectations**

First and Second generation immigrant youth tend to have higher academic accomplishment at all levels, a phenomenon called the Immigration Paradox. (Van Geel & Vedder, 2009) A sense of family obligation in immigrant children from collectivistic cultures is generally strong. They are likely to feel pressure to study to gain the ability to provide, not embarrass their family, and feel a sense of optimism towards upward social mobility. These factors are reinforced by parents who initially immigrated to provide their children with a brighter future, and compounded by their ability to acculturate faster and easier than adults (Cheung et al., 2010). School adjustment serves as an intermediary between family obligations and adaptation. Immigrant children who feel a strong sense of obligation towards family will experience better adaptation and quicker acculturation in general through the school environment. (Van Geel & Vedder, 2009)

**Samantha:** What did you dream of being or doing when you grew up?

**Dad:** That's funny.. Actually when I was a kid I wanted to be a dentist for some reason

**Samantha:** (laughs) You wanted to be a dentist?

**Dad:** Yeah!

**Mom:** I wanted to be a flight attendant

**Samantha:** You wanted to be a flight attendant!?

**Dad:** Yeah quite different

**Mom:** Flight attendants get to wear really pretty uniforms and can fly all over the world to explore and play

**Dad:** She wants to..mom wanted to see the world.

**Samantha:** Why did you want to be a dentist?

**Dad:** umm...I don't know.. Maybe it got put in my head, oh you know choose a profession where you can make lots of money

**Samantha:** Would you say that's because you're from a CBC family,...cause you were born in Canada? Would you say it's because of Chinese expectations? Like the money, doctor/lawyer thing?

**Dad:** Yes partly, I think uh...Grandma, my mom, was pushing us...pushing one of us to.. to go into the medical field

**Mom:** My parents didn't have the expectation of us studying to become doctors or lawyers, just a non-labour job (斯文工), that isn't as hard on your body.

**Samantha:** Oh

**Mom:** A job unlike theirs where they had to do manual labour

Once again, evidenced in the interview is the contrasting expectations of my father's first generation immigrant parents who carried from their culture of origin, implicit knowledge of childrearing and familial standards and my mother's parents who approached parenting with much more freedom and independence of choice.

### **Conclusion**

When raised in a new culture of implicit cognitions, and differing explicit practices concerning parenting here in Canada (Bornstein et al., 2020), my parents together in the process of acculturation, have negotiated practicing a mix of two cultural systems for their "generation 2.5" children. Their individual experiences with immigration in different categorical generations have shaped their outlook on family structure and identity formation. With such experience, they aim to form the best positive relationship for their children with heritage and national identity.

## References

- Bornstein, M., Bohr, Y., & Hamel, K. (2020, December). *Immigration | Immigration, Acculturation, and Parenting*. Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development.  
<https://www.child-encyclopedia.com/immigration/according-experts/immigration-acculturation-and-parenting>
- Cheung, B. (2024). HK-Canada Migration [PowerPoint Slides]. Canvas.  
[https://canvas.ubc.ca/courses/129077/files/31142210?module\\_item\\_id=6573037](https://canvas.ubc.ca/courses/129077/files/31142210?module_item_id=6573037)
- Cheung, B. Y., Chudek, M., & Heine, S. J. (2010). Evidence for a Sensitive Period for Acculturation. *Psychological Science*, 22(2), 147–152.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797610394661>
- Government of Canada, S. C. (2011, September 22). *Classification of Generation Status - 1 - First generation*. Www23.Statcan.gc.ca.  
<https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p3VD.pl?Function=getVD&TVD=117200&CVD=117200&CLV=0&MLV=1&D=1>
- Karthick Ramakrishnan, S. (2004). Second-Generation Immigrants? The “2.5 Generation” in the United States\*. *Social Science Quarterly*, 85(2), 380–399.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0038-4941.2004.08502013.x>
- Li, F. L. N., & Findlay, A. M. (1996). Placing Identity: Interviews with Hong Kong Chinese Immigrants in Britain and Canada. *International Journal of Population Geography*, 2(4), 361–377.  
[https://doi.org/10.1002/\(sici\)1099-1220\(199612\)2:4%3C361::aid-ijpg56%3E3.0.co;2-2](https://doi.org/10.1002/(sici)1099-1220(199612)2:4%3C361::aid-ijpg56%3E3.0.co;2-2)



Noels, K. A., & Clément, R. (2015). Situational variations in ethnic identity across immigration generations: Implications for acculturative change and cross-cultural adaptation.

*International Journal of Psychology*, 50(6), 451–462. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12205>

Statistics Canada. (2011). *Generation status: Canadian-born children of immigrants*.

Www12.Statcan.gc.ca.

[https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-010-x/99-010-x2011003\\_2-eng.cfm](https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-010-x/99-010-x2011003_2-eng.cfm)

Van Geel, M., & Vedder, P. (2009). The Role of Family Obligations and School Adjustment in Explaining the Immigrant Paradox. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 40(2), 187–196.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-009-9468-y>

## Transcript

S: What was your childhood like? ...and what were your aspirations, or what did you dream of being when you were a child?

M: One question at a time please.

S: That was one question!

M: You asked me three questions

S: Oh (laughs) ok. What was your childhood like?

D: You wanna go first honey?

M: NO.

D: (laughs) what was my childhood like?...ahhhhhh. So I grew up with two brothers so...uhhhh.. We always kept each other occupied, playing with each other, typical childhood.

S: hehe ok well let me rephrase this, I want to know specific things

M: OH well my childhood is very different than your childhood. When I was a kid, my parents worked seven days a week, from morning to late night. So we don't have much time spent with our parents. We usually just spend time at home...uh because there's an age gap between my brothers, sister and me, I usually just hung out with my friends or talked on the phone with them.

S: Can you tell me all the age gaps?

M: Age gap? With my brother is like eight years...My elder brother and sister are eight/nine years older, and then my younger brother is like five years younger than me.

S: did you ever wish there were less siblings?

M: Nope, I didn't think that much (冇諗咁多)

S: Cause you only had one younger sibling,...Did you ask for a younger sibling!? So grandma just decided to have four kids?

M: I didn't have any expectations

S: but

M: I didn't make these sort of requests as a kid

S: Didn't I ask for a younger sibling? Or you guys just decided

M: I don't know....this generation is different

S: Did I ask for a younger sibling or did you guys decide to give me a younger sibling

M: You asked

D: No we wanted to have....another

M: Are you recording?

S: Yes

M: Ok next question please

D: We wanted to have! We wanted to have at least two

M: Ok next

S: Dad your answer is very super..

M: That's a different question

S: Daddy your answer is very super... your answer is too superficial. I already knew that you had two brothers in your childhood.

D: So, my childhood I guess...

S: Because your two childhoods are very different

D: Both our parents worked in... I guess basic industry jobs, right? Because they are first generation immigrants, So... their english wasn't very good, it's not like they could get an office job or anything, any kind of a high paying job. We lived a very basic kind of uh, we lived a basic kind of childhood... yeah. We didn't go on vacations like we do all the time with you guys. Right?

S:uh huh

D: Back then life was harder

S: Were you close with Grandpa and Grandma?

D: Was I close with my dad and mum?

S: Yeah

D: Uhhhhh well... kinda, for a chinese family I don't think we are that different but eh..

S What do you mean for a Chinese family?

D: Well, I think western families have more social events. Like they have game night or something like that, We didn't really have that growing up..We didn't play games with our parents.

S: I think that that's just in movies

D: We didn't, we didn't...Play board games with our parents, at least I didn't. Uhhh... I didn't, My parents didn't read to us when we were young or anything like that. Right? They... were always busy working. So... with you and Jackie we spent time reading to you guys playing with you, playing games. Planning a lot of family vacations... but for us...family vacations were far and few between because we didn't have a lot of money when we were growing up.

S: So would you say your goals as a parent were different because of how you grew up? Like you wanted to spend more time with us because you didn't spend a lot of time with your parents?

D: Yeahhh.. We wanted you guys to feel loved and to give you good memories of us.

M: Well I can only say that times have changed, the society of the past and the society now is different

D: Yeah

S: Because this is..this interview is about how you were influenced by your parents, and then how you were influenced to be a different parent, or similar parent

D: We strive to offer you a better childhood than we had right? So.. therefore you know we spend more time with you to take you on more vacations...

S: I'm already tearing up!!!

M: Why?!

S: Cause I'm a crybaby

M: Ok next question we already spent too much time on this one... Next,

S: What did you dream of being or doing when you grew up?

D: That's funny... Actually, when I was a kid I wanted to be a dentist for some reason

S: (laughs)You wanted to be a dentist?

D: Yeah!

M: I wanted to be a flight attendant

S: You wanted to be a flight attendant!?

D: Yeah quite different

S: But that was at what age? Because you switch like many different job aspirations.

M: Elementary age

S: How about in high school

D:I think as soon as I got to high school...

M: Flight attendants get to wear really pretty uniforms and can fly all over the world to explore and play

D: She wants to..mom wanted to see the world.

M: Put makeup on

D: (chuckles)

S: actually sometimes I feel like their makeup is quite scary

M: Then obviously you can do the makeup better yourself

S: (laughs)

M: They don't know how to do makeup, that's why it's scary

M: Ok next question

S: Why did you want to be a dentist?

D: umm...I don't know...Maybe it got put in my head, oh you know choose a profession where you can make lots of money

S: Would you say that's because you're from a CBC family,...cause you were born in canada? Would you say it's because of Chinese expectations? Like the money the doctor lawyer thing?

D: Yes partly, I think uh...Grandma, my mom, was pushing us

S: Cause grandma wants me to be a pharmacist

D: Pushing one of us to.. To go into the medical field

S: None of you guys did.

D: Like optometry or dentistry

S: Oh! Uncle H sort of

D: some kind of doctor. Heh but

M: No, Uncle D is a doctor

S: oh

D: But you actually need really really good marks to get to

M: Not..not doctor doctor

S: not medical doctor, but he has a doctorate degree (laughs)

M; yes good enough

S: Now how come you didn't go for the doctor lawyer thing mommy?

M: Never

D: mommy...mommy didn't have strong background in biology and

S: So your parents didn't have... OH YEAH you failed bio (laughs)

M: exactly...有呢個天份啲

D: Mommy wasn't very strong in sciences

M: That's why I didn't have that natural talent

S: how about your siblings

M: My parents didn't have the expectation of us studying to become doctors or lawyers, just a non-labour job (斯文工), that isn't as hard on your body.

S: Oh

M: A job unlike theirs where they had to do manual labour

S:But then weren't you influenced by your siblings? Like what jobs you wanted to do you wanted to do as well?

M: no

S: You guys were very independent?

M: Yeah we were very free

S: cause I remember you saying before that it was like Auntie A raised you up

M: Nahhhhh...not raise, just after school she'd cook food for us and that kind of stuff. And watch us...sort of like you and your sister basically. As the older sister you watch the younger ones, cook some food, stuff like that.

S: I think you said that before you were born...

\*TIMER FOR DINNER GOES OFF\*

M: Oh sorry bye!

D: continue later...

S: No, I'll continue with you.

D: no take a break.. Gotta wait for mami

S: It doesn't have to be with two parents at the same time

D: Yeahhh...

S: So what kind of child were you?

D: What kind of child? Well ... so I being the middle child,...

S: Oh yeah what does it feel like being the middle child?

D: Comparably I guess I didn't have to shoulder the weight of being the oldest right?

I'm often I guess I'm kind of the...I wouldn't say ignored. But not the center of attention because I'm not the youngest and I didn't have the pressure of...

S: But, what pressures did you have as a middle child?

D: Well I didn't really have any real pressure being the middle child! I wasn't the first, I wasn't the youngest.

S: Do you relate to that sense of comparison between siblings then? Out of all three brothers whose grades were the best?

D: Uncle D, but I maintained more or less straight A's too all the way up until University, which was a different style of learning

D: We all had our own group of friends. I never felt like I was in a shadow, I just competed with my own classmates, not to be better than my brother.

S: Ok then can you tell me about your parents' families? Grandma doesn't really like to talk about her past and I've only met Grandpa twice.

D: So unfortunately, Grandpa's side of the family is kind of fragmented so they never really

S: Is he the only one who came to Canada?

D: No, your Grandfather had two brothers, one older, one younger brother...he was also the middle child.

S: Oh

D: Yup! But unfortunately we never got together. So, from a family point of view we were all in edmonton but

S: Wait, all three brothers were in Edmonton?!

D: Yeah, So grandfather's older brother passed away, died of I believe lung cancer, so he had three sons and I think a daughter, and then grandfather's younger brother had a couple sons but he got divorced so we never really saw those cousins they moved away to calgary. So I never met them until grandfather's younger brother was passing away...somehow, somehow they found them.

S: So Grandpa has outlived both his brothers

D: Yes, he is the only surviving sibling

S: So they all immigrated together from Hong Kong?

D: I believe your great grandfather came here first, and then, grandfather and grandma came later on like half a year later 1974, the year your Uncle D was born.

S: So did the brothers all immigrate together?

D: I'm not sure if they all came together

S: But grandpa isn't from Hong Kong he has a Toisan accent.

D: Yeah well, they were coming through Hong Kong. He's originally from some small village bit met your grandma in Hong Kong.

S: How about Grandma?

D: Grandma has an older brother and older sister.

S: She's the youngest?!

D: Yes

S: But I feel like she had so many more.

D: Well, She actually had other siblings that died in the war, in total how many died I don't know. Long ago, supposedly your great grandpa was some sort of engineer who did work in Hong Kong and China. When the communist took over they took everything and left a three story building and they collected rent on one of the units, then they eventually took more and only left a single unit for them to live.

S: What I know is that when the war broke out, grandma's family was stuck in China so that's why she swam over to Hong Kong with a list of great grandfather's business associates and visited them to try to collect what she could of the remaining money owed.

D: Yes, so like she said they were forced to work in the field even though, so they weren't allowed to pursue education

S: She was studying to become a doctor right?

D: Yeah she was studying. I guess she passed the exam but they didn't let her continue her education so she left because there wasn't a future there.